

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

Christian Unity-In-Diversity In The New Millennium Challenges Facing The Historic Churches

Westminster College Oxford, 4 September 1999, Christian Studies Residential Weekend

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Introduction

An Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Harare, December 1998 the 8th, celebrating the WCC's 50th anniversary) serves as a 'snapshot' of the situation of today's world and of today's churches. Much depends on the 'angle of vision' we look through - UK centred ? - my denomination the most important? - do we want to see what others are seeing, do we want to hear what others are expecting of us ?

Three large challenges

I. Two views of today's world in stark contrast

One world, ready or not ?

Globalization is sweeping over us all, both North and South, both West and (former Communist) East, whether we like it or not: economic, because of the sheer power of western capital (especially wielded for their own profit by trans-national corporations, almost all based in the USA) effectively served by intergovernmental agencies such as the WTO, IMF, World Bank, OECD, etc. in which the wishes of the USA are almost always allowed to rule the roost. Also culturally, because of the sheer power of US TV corporations and the longing of the elites (and not only they) in the poorer countries to become as 'advanced' as the USA. Also in terms of tourism - the weekly, if not daily TransAfrica bus visiting Etsha in Botswana; of higher education with furious competition for international students; of AIDS (though hardly of treatment for it, let alone

education about it); of the growing inter-action of the different world religions - and much more ...

Who decides ? Who profits ? Which way does the power flow ?

One human race, foreshadowed in the diversity of Christian churches ?

As the Holy Spirit has called people of so many communities into their 'own' local churches, using their own languages, adapting their own ancestral customs and outlooks, yet in friendship and as appropriate active partnership with fellow-Christians in other places, so we can see coming a world in which we shall all benefit from each others' resources: African joy in worship, Buddhist styles of meditation, Indian gifts of friendship and skills in computer programming, etc. In the WCC, as in many other voluntary NGOs (non-governmental organisations) yet all too seldom in the UNO, a style is developing whereby local churches can enter into committed fellowship yet without giving up their own patterns, self-hood, responsibility etc. while creating ways of reaching common decisions on matters agreed to deserve a common approach, and of commissioning joint groups or lasting bodies to undertake pieces of work on behalf of all - without always expecting the same nations to provide the leadership, the power, etc. A world of mutual understanding, mutual care, mutual concern on behalf of and for the long term sake of the well-being of all God's children and of the planet as a whole.

Money is made to serve the purposes and responsibilities of our common humanity, not our fellow-human beings made to serve the financial interests and greed of a few.

This contrast was seen in Harare to be not so very different to the picture in the gospels' accounts of Jesus' teaching about the contrast between the 'kingdom of God' and the 'kingdoms of the powers of this present world/age'. And so the Harare Assembly voiced a sharp cry of alarm - possibly (see p.55 in my account) the clearest 'word' it has ever issued to both church and world, a 'central focus for the witness of all the diverse churches throughout the world, and giving a vital context to many other concerns already on their agendas'. To put it perhaps over-sharply, the Assembly declared war on the present thrust of

globalization and urges the churches and all their friends and allies to put our shoulders in any way we can behind the effort to reverse the way the great wheels of the world economy and communications are rolling.

This translates into three of the key phrases of this Assembly:

a) Turn to God

God is by no means only concerned with what we do on Sunday mornings ! There is a war on between the forces of light and of darkness, and while we all need to be properly humble about our own part, there is an evident need to be willing to re-think the unchallenged patterns of our life (e , g. that money saved attracts interest) so as to base all we do on what we can know of the purposes and intentions not of ourselves or our earthly rulers, but of God - as shown forth in Jesus.

b) Rejoice in Hope

Things do not need to stay as they are - God has made human beings responsible for the future of the planet; things can be different, must be made very different to the cruel, contemptuous, one-sidedly greedy patterns of today. As we can begin to see coming an adequately shared and common future, in which all can both give and receive, so we shall indeed be able to rejoice in a true and meaningful hope, not just dread what the future threatens us with.

c) Who are the "we"?

The Assembly's worship enabled a sense of the whole Church of Christ, in all our diversities, at the service of the whole human family of every time and place. This is the "we" that matters to God, and therefore no less to the members of any conventional "us" (national, tribal, denominational, racial, gender, etc). An Assembly held in Africa rejoiced in the sense of 'ubuntu' - 'I am as I am because you and the others are as you are' (my book p. 39).

II. Challenges within and for an ecumenical movement dangerously bogged down

The highpoint of the entire meeting was Nelson Mandela's address (my book p. 44f), warmly thanking the WCC for 'fifty years of achievement in activating the conscience of the world for peace and on behalf of the poor, the disadvantaged and the dispossessed'. Did we think that was what we had been doing ? ! Yet the opening reports of both the Moderator (Catholicos Aram I of the Armenians) and General Secretary (Dr Konrad Raiser of Germany) dwelt at length on the 'crisis' of the ecumenical movement as reflected in the many difficulties confronting the WCC.

It proved hard to get an adequate 'handle' on these - different people had very different ideas about which were the most important ! There are surely a great many different causes, differing in intensity according to our different backgrounds and expectations - but all in some way reflecting a human refusal to recognise and to follow the leading of God the Holy Spirit into a different future.

The main problems all seem to have to do with the degree to which churches really want to participate in a common and single fellowship of obedience. To characterize them in over-simple terms of the different traditions of the Church:

a) Some churches say they want to share in the one ecumenical movement but find it hard to do so in actual practice

Here I am thinking above all of the great Roman Catholic Church, which is so much bigger in numbers than any other, and which has such a clear and definite view of its own calling as the Church. At Harare its impressive delegation hand-picked by the Vatican (see my book p .14f) was never less than encouraging, almost always glorying in this possibility of sharing in an Assembly (and modestly silent when they felt critical), while yet carefully responding to questions about their membership of the WCC by recognising that in 1972 a decision was taken not to join it officially as a church, and that the time for re-visiting that decision has not yet come.

At the same time, the history of the question of eucharistic sharing in the

fellowship of the WCC (my book p. 35f) shows how difficult it is to maintain a discipline of not sharing the sacramental elements as common obedience and trust grows. The question of an 'infallible' pope, as of the Vatican as a state with representation in the UNO, would also prove difficult to live with in such a fellowship. So it isn't exactly hard to see 'why' the RC Church does not officially join in a world council, while being ready in many countries (not yet all - Poland, for example) to join the national one. And yet the comparative 'absence' of that huge - and often, not least in Africa - admirably impressive church cannot but gravely weaken the ecumenical fellowship. One must hope that the next Pope will substantially change this picture.

A similar paragraph needs to be devoted to the thousands of 'African Initiated Churches' of whom only a handful are as yet effectively joining in the visible common ecumenical movement. I am delighted that Ronald Nathan will be speaking about these, and much look forward to learning from him.

- b) Other churches - especially the large body of churches centred in the USA of 'evangelical' and 'pentecostal' traditions - who broadly support the 'American way of life' are still strongly hostile to the WCC, and see it as fomenting 'disobedience' to God's true purposes.

By definition, these were hardly present in Harare; their views are to be found in a number of highly critical books (e.g. H . T . Hoekstra, *The WCC and the Demise of Evangelism*, Bert Beach, *Ecumenism: Boon or Bane?* - ask me for details). Dangerous for any outsider to try and summarise their approach and views, but they will usually focus on: biblical authority, the priority of 'evangelism' (as they see it) over any other dimension of obedience, the 'calling' of the USA as a Christian nation, the rightness of its 'total separation' of church and state, the evidence of the Holy Spirit's work in terms of 'speaking in tongues' (the Pentecostals) and more generally in terms of numbers of people joining their type of churches, , , .

There is much that can be said in detail about relationships with such churches; but the overall picture remains admittedly difficult. One small touch in Harare was the carefully prepared booklet Proclaim Liberty: A Jubilee Appeal (see my book p.58), which as far as I was aware fell altogether flat on its face, a revealing example of the way a USA-centred view of the world can become quite out of touch with the 'real world' of so many others. Yet these sort of views, not least in the UK, still carry an astonishing degree of weight among many 'ordinary' Christians, so they should not be 'laughed out of court', even if that is sometimes the best response !

c) A third group are the Orthodox Churches in communion with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople.

These have all been members of the WCC for many years, either since the beginnings in 1938/48 (essentially the Greek-speaking ones) or since Krushchev allowed the Russian Orthodox and its sister churches in other 'communist' countries to join the WCC in 1961, In the earlier years it was 'normal' for the Orthodox delegates to issue their own 'Statement of Findings' at the end of a WCC meeting, as if to show that they could not simply be expected to agree with what the leadership of the conference had put forward. From the later 1960s on that practice fell away, but the attitudes that lay behind it started to re-appear in rather critical official letters to the WCC in 1973 from both the Ecumenical and the Russian Patriarchs. Since then there has been a growing chorus of doubts and difficulties within the Orthodox family, expressed in Harare in a shockingly aggressive way by the young Russians who were acting for that Church in the deliberate absence of a 'proper' delegation. I have written at length about this on pp. 15-21 of my booklet; please again ask me if you wish to know more. While there are more internal differences between the different Orthodox churches than may easily appear, there are still a dismayingly large number of huge cultural and theological obstacles (i.e. 'layers upon layers of unshared background' !) which the 'normal' disciplines of friendship and mutual striving for understanding will not readily dispel.

- d) Then there are the churches which officially take part and send their delegates, but which take as much or little notice of what the WCC comes up with as they wish.

This category includes in one way or another virtually all the W. European 'historic' Protestant churches, very much including those in the UK. Each of our member churches says it is glad to take part in the wider ecumenical movement, pays a certain amount into the common pool (in practice relatively little - except for the Germans, whose pattern of 'church tax' has enabled them to pay for approximately 75% of the WCC budget these last 20 years, but are now having to face the WCC with huge gaps ! } and sends its delegates at least to the major meetings, but comes - as all members are entitled to - to its own decisions as to what is of importance and what is not. Over the 40 years in which I have been involved with the WCC I have seen the degree of interest and expectation in the WCC go down and down in this country.

The expectations of UK media are already a sign: of the major newspapers only the *Daily Telegraph* had a reporter accredited to the press office of the Assembly, who was looking for the sort of news that paper would wish to print. Only the BBC had a serious team of communicators available. The church press all looked to one or more of 'their own' delegates to produce copy; at the risk of being over-critical I believe it can be said that none gave an adequately objective, full or profound account of what the Assembly was trying to be and do. What I have heard of the 'follow-up' in the various national bodies of the member churches does not suggest that in any case the delegates were able to re-shape the agenda or priorities of their church in function of what the world body had recommended. We are in a period - «t this end of the world - when the historic 'Protestant' churches are becoming dangerously in-turned on the question of their own survival, and thus dismayingly unconcerned with the agenda the churches of the South will tell them God is setting for the world-wide fellowship.

I hardly know how to put in a nutshell the 'challenge' of Harare to these churches except to point to the 'globalization' challenge as one which, if faced with energy

and determination, would soon lead to a deep re-shaping of our inner-church and interchurch agendas too !

III. The Promise of Truly Ecumenical Worship

As at both the previous two Assemblies (Vancouver 1983 and Canberra 1991), most participants in Harare will say that the worship was the best single thing, well worth going half way round the world to be part of. Not all - I have heard several UK participants say that it was a 'bit much' for them, too distant from the type of worship they know and love in their own church. Nonetheless, I believe the WCC has - thanks to a good number of people, many of whom are based here in the UK (e.g. Gwen Cashmore; Fred Kaan, John Bell, Maggie Hamilton) - has indeed been remarkably graced by the Holy Spirit in discerning and creating possibilities of worship that could help to renew all the churches if only we could allow ourselves to pay attention and bring comparable care and imagination to bear.

This cannot be the place to try and go into detail. See my Harare book pp.32-35, and the article in the *Epworth Review* in the booklist. The four clearest features, all far more easily said than done, in this still developing 'tradition' are these:

- use the best gifts of each and every person and culture represented in the congregation (including of course the musical gifts - cf. the wonderful sense of joy communicated so readily by the majority African choir in Harare);
- plan acts of warship that are deliberately specific to the particular group in that particular place and time;
- include at least once in every act of worship provision for the participants to contribute 'elements' - in speech or action - that cannot be foreseen, so that something is 'happening' that no one could have earlier expected;
- shape the worship as being offered by and on behalf of the 'world', not just of the Christians who are there, so that for instance the 'we' of the prayers is in no way inturned but rather a deliberate solidarity with the total human family.

The Iona Community are the outstanding example in the UK of a group who are making this approach to worship their own, and producing an astonishing quantity of excellent, fresh songs and services to help others discover their way into it all. I pray that their influence may go on growing in strength and wisdom for many years yet. Meanwhile; let this be a third major area of 'challenge' to our churches, at the local level quite as much as in conferences and synods beyond the regular round of Sunday services. Here is a challenge to which any and everyone can offer to join in responding.

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